

STRANGER THINGS



Darkest Night

Armageddon Book 1: Darkest Night - The Autobiography of Mike Wheeler by inktopia

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Summary: "El's gone, like fresh breath on a pane of cold glass that yields to the harsh winter morning. I don't know where she is, but as long as it takes, as many lifetimes I need to sacrifice, as many faces I have to wear, I will find her, or die trying!" -From the Journal of Mike Wheeler (353 days) [Completed]

1. The End

Darkest Night

Chapter 1 - The End

Day Zero:

"Eleven!"

I screamed at the top of my lungs and ran towards the innocent thirteen-year-old girl as fast as my legs could carry me. She was my best friend, and she was about to sacrifice her life to save me from death. But she never understood that I would rather be dead than live in this world without her.

My life had not always been so gloomy. Just a few hours ago, I was the luckiest bastard in the universe, but then fate threw me down from the heavens with a swift kick to the chest. Looking back at how the tragedy unfolded, I sometimes wonder whether I was a fool to have not prepared myself for the inevitable. Things were going really great for me, but I should have known, nothing good lasts forever.

Earlier that night Eleven had used her psychic powers while floating in a Sensory Deprivation tank to find Will's location in the Upside Down. Hopper and Mrs. Byers immediately left for the Lab to rescue Will before the Demogorgon could strip the flesh off his bones. In the meantime, the four of us - me, Lucas, Dustin, and Eleven - were hanging out in the auditorium minding our own damn business when the Military showed up out of nowhere. I always knew that the military was full off mouthbreathers with shit for brains. They unholstered their guns and took aim at the three of us. I couldn't see a morsel of empathy in their eyes. They didn't like loose ends, and they were prepared to kill three innocent children to bury their crimes. But they didn't possess one crucial piece of information that only I knew.

'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'

The military vanguards were aiming their guns at the boy who had

just kissed their most potent weapon, and within a few seconds, Eleven blew their brains through their eye sockets in retribution. It was a gruesome sight, but given the option, I'd have done the same if someone was pointing a gun Eleven. As expected, the stress overloaded her tired, little body and she lost consciousness and fell to the floor. Before we could get the fuck out of there, the remaining military force came through and finally captured us.

A man with a headful of white hair held Eleven and kept consoling her that she would be going home soon. But she already had a home.

"LET HER GO!" I shouted the words as the wall collapsed and the beast from hell came through and attacked those scoundrels. I never looked a gift-horse in the mouth, so we ran away with Eleven in the nick of time while the military kept fighting a fruitless battle with the nightmare envisioned by themselves.

The Demogorgon, unintentionally, had freed Eleven from the clutches of the Bad men. We were going home, and this time, there would be five of us because the party had a new member. We made our way to a classroom, closed the door and gently laid Eleven on the table. Then we waited breathlessly for the fight outside to get over. Now that I think about it, did Lucas and Dustin knew what was going to happen? Is that why they moved away and gave Eleven and me some space to hold our hands and speak our last words?

Back in the classroom, I was already forming plans in my head about how to introduce Eleven to my mom;

'Hi Mom, this is Eleven, she can move a car with her mind.'

'Uhh, Mom, this is Eleven, she likes Eggos.'

'Mom, this is Eleven, no that's her real name. She's been hiding in our basement for the week.'

'Mom, this is Eleven, she is. a friend, and has no place to go. Can she stay with us?'

Damn it, should I tell Mom that I kissed her? She's gonna be so freaked out.

'Hi Mom, this is Eleven. I found her in the woods the following night after Will disappeared. I've been hiding her in my basement for the last week. She likes Eggos, and she also likes my clothes. She helped bring Will back but please don't ask how. I kissed her tonight, and I think she likes me too. Please let her stay with me... oops... I mean us!'

I was already blushing at that time. I had never kissed a girl before, and contrary to what Dustin thought, it felt incredible. Then I looked into Eleven's eyes and suffered a heart attack. Eleven was looking into my eyes with an intense stare, and they spoke volumes. Of course, she didn't talk much. Her vocabulary was limited to a set of simple words like, *'Bad, Eleven, Night, Understand, Papa, Hiding'* and *'Mike'*. But she didn't need to use fancy words to communicate. It was her eyes that always did the talking, and at that very moment, they said only one thing;

'I will never leave you again, Mike.'

I also didn't want her to leave me, ever again. Lucas could go screw himself, but I wanted Eleven in the party. I don't know exactly why I wanted her to join the party. It wasn't the kiss, it wasn't the fact that she was the first girl to speak to me for more than ten minutes without boring me to death.

'She makes me feel warm and fluffy.'

She could give me the cooties for all I cared, but I never regretted the soft peck on the lips. She didn't either. It was a story made in the heavens.

Then it all went to shit as the door burst open and the monster prowled into the room looking for prey. We were assembled in a room; it was our classroom to be precise. I sometimes assumed Fate to be a sarcastic scoundrel, and I was correct. This room was the holy shrine of learning where we were supposed to acquire knowledge, and we learned a lot that day. But it came at a terrible cost, and someone else paid for us.

In a classroom designed by a nightmare, Eleven started walking away from us. No, she was actually walking away from me. The cold halogen lamps lining the ceiling kept flickering, but I could see

Eleven clearly as she slowly walked towards the monster which was pinned to the blackboard by her powers. Her posture reminded me of the day she rescued me from certain death near the quarry. It was full of hatred, rage, and resolution. Usually, that wouldn't have scared me the slightest. In fact, I feel pity for the being, whether human or Demogorgon, who was about to face the wrath of Eleven. Even the monster that wiped out an entire military platoon never stood a chance.

It was always like this from the very first day after we found Eleven. The three of us would somehow manage to find ourselves in danger, but Eleven would come running no matter where she was and save us before we pissed our pants. After that, I'd bring her back to my home, feed her Eggos, tell her stories and then she would peacefully go to sleep in the tent I made for her. Only this time, she didn't plan on coming back to her home. She had a different purpose this time, and I could feel it in my bones. Eleven was not just walking away from us, she was stepping away from existence itself. And that scared me to my core. I felt worse than the time she ran away after my fight with Lucas. I felt her sorrow, I felt her guilt, I felt her heart, and they all said the same thing.

'I don't want to go, Mike, I don't want to give up even one fraction of the happiness that I finally found with you. But I have to go. For us.'

'No shit you won't. Who's gonna eat the box of Eggos in the fridge?' I thought as I ran after her. I wouldn't let her sacrifice herself to save a bunch of losers from Hawkins Middle School. In a heartbeat, I knew what I had to do. I would firmly embrace her, drag her back from her doom, and we would all run away before that monster recovered and attacked. We were good at hiding, and I was sure that the beast won't find us again.

Worst case? I'd hold her, then fling her back to the guys while I take her place, they'll run away with Eleven, and I'd divert the monster. The good part? I was skilled at running and hiding. The sad part? I was going to die. But I was ready to accept that fate because I did her make-over and she was too damn pretty to die. Mike Wheeler, the biggest pussy in Hawkins Middle School, was going to die a hero. Yay.

The only problem was that Lucas and Dustin also joined the bandwagon. Crazy fuckers, both of them. We would save her or die in the process altogether. Who were we kidding? We accepted our fate, together. Lucas was throwing rocks at that creature using his puny wrist rocket. Dustin and I were cheering him on. But the monster kept coming towards us.

'And then, we are all going to die.'

But El didn't let us die. She flung the monster with every bit of power she had left in that little body and started moving towards it with her chin tucked towards her chest. The beast screamed in agony as it felt the impending doom, and it was scared. Mr. Clarke told us one day that every living being out there possessed a sense of self-preservation. They wanted to live at all costs, but self-preservation was not only about saving ourselves. It was about protecting our DNA through our offspring. Animals would sometimes sacrifice themselves to ensure their children continued to live on. He gave numerous examples. What he forgot to tell us was that humans had a fucked-up notion about how this was supposed to work. At some point in the past fifty thousand years, we had basically stopped giving a damn about our DNA, because El didn't share any with us. We knew Eleven only for a week, and she was about to sacrifice herself to save a group of losers who weren't even visible in the rear-view mirrors of most of the people in Hawkins.

So, back in my nightmare, I ran towards El filled with confidence. I was going to protect the last mage on Earth. But then she threw me away with a flick of her hand. Did I mention that she had telekinetic powers? It all happened in an instant. Before I could realize what happened, I was flying backward and ended up crashing into the wall. It hurt like shit, but not from the fall. It hurt because I finally realized that El was going to die, and she would not let me take her place. She sensed it like we all did, but we were fools not to accept it. She had embraced her destiny. Tears came running down my cheeks as I finally gave up and started whispering, "No El, I promised, please no."

She didn't listen to my cries. She was on a mission and would finish it at all costs, precisely like how she was trained in the lab. She reached the monster and then stopped for a moment. I was feeling hopeful,

maybe she would kill the fiend, and perhaps she would come back to us. Yes, she would return to the boy who had promised to take her to the Snowball. But she had other plans. She looked back at me and uttered two words that were lodged deep in my heart on that day. Like the needles of cactus, I could never get them out of my heart, ever.

"Goodbye, Mike!"

It was the answer to a question that I never had a chance to ask. And only I could comprehend the true meaning of that answer. The answer was *'Forever.'*

Fate had made grand plans for me. Mike Wheeler had always been a loser, bullied by some and ignored by others. Why would he ever get the chance to lead a happy life? Let's royally fuck him up. But no, this was not only about Mike Wheeler, the dungeon master. This was indeed about Eleven, the cursed mage. I think God hated her from the moment she was born, because absolutely no one, not even Troy, deserved a fate like this. Destiny wanted to break that child apart and erase her from reality itself.

Then I heard her scream as she pulled the last bit of power from deep within her body and burned that monster into oblivion. There was a loud thunderclap, then both were gone in an instant. A cloud of ash appeared in the air and slowly drifted to the floor. The lights stopped flickering as Eleven stopped existing in the mortal realm.

I must have been dreaming because I could swear that the ashes took the shape of a heart before slowly coming down to the ground. Then we ran. We searched frantically, we looked under desks, we looked around the room, we even looked below the staircase. Eleven was nowhere to be found, and the flame of hope started waning inside us. I came back to the chessboard where Fate just checkmated four innocent kids. The ashes were still there, and it made a dark smear on the ground. I went down and picked a bit up in my fingers. It was oily and had a sickly smell. I felt like throwing up as I thought about the possible origin of that ash. But I needed to collect a sample. The police procedural movies showed that Scientists could analyze stuff to find traces of victims. I took out a small paper and scooped some ash in it.

Lucas came and stood beside me, "What are you doing, Mike?"

I was not in the mood to give an answer, so I ignored him. Suddenly Lucas touched my shoulder. "Listen, man. I'm sorry."

I looked at Lucas with sympathy. He was crying even a few minutes ago. I felt sorry for him, then I punched him in the shoulder.

"You did this, you fucking did this!" I was pissed off.

Dustin came running, "What are you saying? Have you lost your freaking mind?"

"No Dustin, he said those words. She was a stray dog. She tricked us into getting some food and shelter. SHE WAS THE MONSTER."

Lucas was taken aback, and tears started streaming down his eyes. Fuck me sideways, he was actually crying. I had a sinking feeling inside my stomach. But I trudged on, I needed to vent my frustration. Someone whispered in my ears, *'It's not him, you did this.'*

The voice echoed, *'She killed herself to protect you because you made her fall in love with you. You took away her survival instinct.'*

A tsunami came crashing down and swept me away. I started shaking as tears came down from my eyes. I often wondered how much we could cry before we ran out of tears. I would get the answer before the end of the day. As I said, the classroom was a temple of knowledge and learning.

"Well, food Lucas? When was the last time she ate? What food did she eat, Lucas?" Lucas didn't have an answer. I wanted to choke the life out of him. Dustin suddenly looked back towards his bag that rested on the floor. It had some pudding inside it. *FUCK.*

I kept venting, "You know something? Even death-row convicts get their last meal. The only thing she had were Eggos, this morning. And even then, she left it behind to save us."

The same voice whispered in my ear, *'You believe she's dead now? Good, accept the fact. She's never coming back.'*

The ghost kept laughing in a hoarse voice inside my soul as I almost fell down.

"Please God, please bring her back." My prayer was not heard because God had already made a deal with Fate. I still had some tears left, and I was letting them out as fast as I could. They came streaming down through an opened floodgate and proceeded to wet my t-shirt. My words entered my ears like boiling water. "ELEVEN wanted some food Lucas, just some Eggos. We give more food to our dog, Lucas. We even took the bowl away from her."

'She was a stray dog, she was never going to stay.' The fucking voice was getting on my nerves now.

I remembered the day I was pissed off at her for telling lies about Will being alive. I was a fool to doubt her. She was right, and we were wrong all along. But that's how it was supposed to be, right? Losers are supposed to fuck up every damn time. Otherwise, the word wouldn't hold any meaning. I remembered giving her a waffle that I had sneaked in earlier. Was it out of compassion? Like how we would often give food to a stray dog? She didn't care. She grabbed it and started eating while listening to my verbal abuse. If she had even one ounce of dignity, she would've thrown that waffle away. But she didn't throw it. She kept munching the soggy leftover with tears in her eyes.

"Survival of the fittest. Animals never care about dignity." Mr. Clarke's voice rang from the pedestal. Where was that fucking instinct when she sacrificed herself tonight? Darwin was an idiot, an A-grade asshole.

Why did she come into my life? Why couldn't she just stay back in the lab? She would be safe, and I'd be oblivious but happy.

"And home, Lucas? Shelter? I left her back in the quarry that night. Still, she found her way back. You guys brought her back, didn't you? Why did you? WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST LEAVE HER THERE?" I screamed as my voice broke.

Dustin looked at me in disgust. But Lucas probably knew how I was feeling. He locked his gaze to the ground.

"Yes Lucas, she was a dog. A stray dog who wanted some food and some shelter. Who you could kick as many times as you want and still she'll come back because she yearned for some food, a shelter, and some affection. And like every stray dog out there, she got run over by a car while trying to save her master. END OF STORY." I screamed out the last words. It wasn't aimed at Lucas. It was aimed at the figure standing in front of me.

Fate was standing in front of me, ticking boxes on a piece of paper.

'Kill an innocent girl for no crime of her own?' Checked.

'Give her a taste of happiness before she died?' Checked.

'Make sure Mike Wheeler can't love again?' Checked.

'Fuck Mike Wheeler's life up?' Double Checked.

'What else?'

Then I remembered another question about Eleven. Did Lucas and Dustin know that she was the monster? There should be no doubts left in their minds because when she killed it, she also disappeared alongside it. If that wasn't a glaring proof, then I didn't know what could be. Maybe how she freakishly bled from her nose all the time should've given away her identity?

Then I touched my face. It was almost dry. Yay, I had discovered the crying capacity of Humans. I was going to get a Nobel Prize. Then I looked at Dustin and Lucas and saw the devastation that I had caused. It was too late to take back my words, but I didn't care. I was fucking pissed off at everything and everyone. I wanted to end everything. I wanted to blow this building to smithereens. I wanted..., with a crushing feeling I realized, I wanted Eleven back. I wanted my friend.

I wanted that weirdo who would stay in a tent made of blankets and pretend that it was a palace.

I wanted that freak who would bleed from her nose because she moved a truck with her mind.

I wanted that monster who would kill a dozen enemies to save her friends.

I wanted that anomaly that could find people just by looking at their photos.

I wanted that fool who would eat Eggos for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

I wanted that idiot who would allow a complete loser like Mike Wheeler to kiss her and then smile as if he was her world.

I wanted her back, with all her flaws and all her oddities, because she made me feel complete. Good lord, I was crying again.

Lucas was crying too. I'd never seen him cry for so long before. I'd never seen him surrender, but his streak came to an end. Mike Wheeler beat Lucas Sinclair in a verbal battle. Dustin was too shocked to even react. He just stared at us as pain streaked through his face. I scooped some ash up and got up. "Let's get out before the police arrive."

I left Lucas and Dustin there all by themselves. I didn't need them anymore. They couldn't help me. They couldn't erase these memories that were crushing my heart in an iron grip.

"Mike!"

A brief ripple spread through my consciousness and nearly knocked me over. Was..., was that El? Great, the voice in my mind sounded like Eleven now. I went out to glaring lights and surrendered myself to the police.

A/N: This is the first story that I published and there is plenty of material that got left out. So I am doing a complete rewrite while keeping the core concept intact.

The first chapter may read like a lot of ranting, but that's a heartbroken thirteen year old boy who had just lost his first love. As we move forward, the writing style will change dramatically to indicate his acceptance of his loss and also the sheer determination to find El no matter what it takes.

2. Darkest Hour

Chapter 2- Darkest Hour

Day Eleven:

I squatted in front of the tent made of blankets and spoke with suppressed excitement, "Maybe we can call you El. Short for Eleven." In response, the girl sitting in front of me smiled nervously as she memorized the word, she apparently liked her new name.

Then she disappeared into a cloud of black ash.

A moment later, I woke up screaming and gasping for breath. I had no clue where I was or what time it was but felt the urgent need to go find the girl as soon as possible. Before I could leave the bed, a strong but nimble pair of hands seized me tightly, and a voice whispered, "Mike? You're okay. You're safe."

I looked up, and laid my eyes on Nancy who was gently hugging and caressing me. Then the world came crashing down as I remembered where I was. Eleven days ago I had lost my best friend, and since then, the nightmares had not left me even for a moment.

I stared at Nancy and asked her a question that I didn't need the answer to, "She's gone right?"

"Mike..."

I lost my shit and started crying as realization dawned on me. Nancy kept consoling me through the night until the first rays of the sun hit the window, but the morning didn't end the nightmare. Nothing could ever fill the hole left in my heart by the mage who came in my life like a hurricane and left just like one.

A lifetime later, I looked at the clock on the wall and sighed. It was time to go to school. I dragged myself off the bed and went to the washroom. My feet pulled me to the mirror but, the sight shocked me. A stranger stood behind the mirror with a pair of hollow eyes devoid of emotion. Two weeks back, that image belonged to the leader of a relentless group of outcasts who didn't give a shit about the world around them. Now, the stranger without a shadow just kept looking beyond me with a distant stare. His hair was matted and seemed uneven. If he had been any older, he would have had a beard

spread all over his face. I splashed my face with water to wake myself up. It was ice cold, *'Perfect, fucking perfect.'*

I put on a baggy sweater and matching blue jeans and went downstairs. Mom would drive me to school today. She didn't trust me with the cycle since I crashed it into a Hawkins mini-van which was keeping tabs on us. It went away and never came back. With it, my last hope of seeing Eleven also disappeared forever.

It was the time for a change. The world was progressing around me at the speed of light, and I couldn't keep up. On my way to school, I saw a couple kissing in the park. Two weeks ago, I would have felt disgusted at the sight of two grown-ups sucking faces. That Mike was gone now, this one kept staring at them longingly. It was not the kiss that attracted me, but the thought of seeing and holding Eleven again someday, *'If only, one more time.'*

Mom dropped me at the school and reluctantly went away after kissing me on the forehead. She could feel the turmoil in my heart, but she was not equipped to handle the inferno. I was too young to suffer such a massive heartbreak, and not even my all-knowing mother could do anything about it.

I started walking towards the cycle stand. Other days my friends would be waiting for me, but today, no one was there. It didn't surprise me. Given the way, I behaved with them last week I was sure I would never see them again. To be honest, I felt sorry for my behavior and wanted to apologize, but I never got a second chance. I didn't deserve a second chance. The Supercom never came back to life since the channels went dead eleven days ago. Now they only produced static that howled across my bedroom every time it was switched on. I made myself climb the stairs somehow and reached the classroom. Then I went and sat down on the last bench and kept my eyes locked on the table in front of me. I could feel two pairs of eyes on me, and they wanted answers. But they would never get their answer because there wasn't one.

I didn't pay any attention to the class, it was the same annoying shit every day.

"Mr. Wheeler, can you please pay attention?" Mr. Clarke usually never raised his voice. I came out of my trance in which I was thinking about the time when Eleven sat on the lazy boy for the first

time, how she smiled at me back then.

"Damn!" I cursed loudly and then winced as the realization hit me.

Mr. Clarke looked at me with a shocked expression, and it was my turn to be shocked. Did I really say that out loud?

"Meet me after class, Mr. Wheeler."

During lunchtime, I went down to the cafeteria to wonder about. It wasn't lunch that dragged me down there, but there was nothing for me to do. I hated that fucking classroom that stole Eleven away from me. So, I took every opportunity to stay away from that hellhole. Suddenly I found myself in the line for lunch. There was a shiny metal lunch plate in my hands. *'When did that happen?'* I was moderately amused.

The server smiled at me and put some food on my plate. And then her jaw dropped as the plate fell from my hands in an instant. The metal plate crashed to the floor and sent potatoes and peas everywhere. A lone piece of Eggo slowly cartwheeled away from the plate. They were running some sort of campaign and decided that an Eggo would be an excellent addition to a child's meal. They weren't wrong because the other kids loved them, but they didn't know what it did to me. I couldn't blame them, but it shattered my heart and all those suppressed memories came rushing in and rattled my soul. I got down and started picking up the food back on my plate. The kids around me were laughing at the fool making an even bigger fool out of himself. Mike Wheeler finally lost it eh? I didn't mind them, *'Come to my hell, you would be lucky to even function, assholes.'*

I didn't notice that I was crying. I pocketed the Eggo and got up, then I slipped on the butter and fell down again. But as I said, I didn't give a fuck. Mike Wheeler, the loser, was back, and he didn't give a shit about his image.

I got home early that day and went down into the basement as always. The tent made up of blankets was still up. I kept the Millennium Falcon and the T-Rex inside. Eleven probably liked them the last time she was here, and she would be delighted to have her own pet T-Rex and a flying saucer when she came back. There was also a box of Eggos carefully tucked beside the pillow, in case she was hungry. Suddenly the flap moved, and my heart stopped. I carefully walked to the tent and gently lifted the flap up. I would be lying if I told you that I didn't expect to see Eleven squatting there,

happily munching on an Eggo and waiting for my return.

An image flash by my mind, *'Eleven looking at me with hope in her eyes as I entered the tent. Her friend had returned like he had promised and now they would be together through the night discussing the wonders of the world.'*

Then the dream shattered into pieces as the emptiness welcomed me inside the empty tent.

"NO, Don't go. I have so much to tell you!" I screamed, and then I lost it and started kicking the chairs that held the tent in place.

"YOU..."

"MADE..."

"ME..."

"SWEAR..."

"AN..."

"OATH..."

I broke down and started crying, again. It was also a regular with me nowadays. The tent will be back up tomorrow, and the boxes would be inside, Nancy made sure of that. But I needed to break it down now. I wanted to end it all.

I skipped dinner and went to bed quickly. Mom was worried, but Nancy was there to support me. She assured mom that she'll be bringing some food for me after a few hours. Mom didn't object because she had faith in Nancy. I also had faith in her, because I knew that I'll be throwing the plate away when she would bring it to me, and unlike mom, she wouldn't get mad. I came back to my room and slammed the door. Both Nancy and Mom could pick locks, so I didn't try locking it, *'Damn thieves, both of them.'* I fell asleep very soon.

I didn't know how long I was out cold, but suddenly I found myself standing in the middle of a forest. All around me I could see giant, dead trees trying their best to shield me from the icy cold winds that promised to cut through the skin. This was probably a dream, but it all felt so real. I started walking as fast as I could to make some heat. It was so damn cold tonight, and the wind was trying its best to kill the land around me. I wrapped the jacket around myself but still kept shivering. It felt as if hell had frozen over and then someone poured liquid nitrogen all over it. A few minutes later, from the corner of my eyes, I spotted a strange mound near a big Oak tree. Instinctively, my

feet dragged me there. Must be a deer or something or maybe a Demogorgon. Nothing scared me anymore, even if this wasn't a dream. But when I reached the tree, I nearly lost control and fell down. It was Eleven. There was no mistaking it. I felt as if I've actually found Princess Leia on the shattered planes of Tatooine.

I bent over her, "Eleven? Eleven? EL?"

She didn't respond. Then I carefully ran my eyes over her body and gasped. The moonlight was sparse, but she looked pale and sickly. Something appeared unnatural about her skin, so, I got down to touch her neck and immediately pulled my hand back in shock. Her throat was stiff and as cold as the snow around it. The damn cold was slowly seeping the life away from the small and frail body of my soulmate. I immediately took my jacket off and wrapped it around her body as best as I could. The cold wind howled through the trees and brushed against my skin. It felt as if thousands of knives were skinning me alive. But I didn't give a damn, *'I WILL SAVE ELEVEN.'*

But the jacket didn't help at all, and she kept growing pale. I was standing there, dumbfounded when I suddenly remembered the survival guidebook we carried with us during camping trips. She required heat because her tired body wasn't generating enough by itself. Moreover, she had no food in her stomach and no energy to burn away the cold. I needed to provide heat to her body right now, but there were no fires around. So, I did what I would not have done in a million years, two weeks back. I laid down beside her and wrapped myself around her tiny, cold body and put the jacket on us. Her body felt like a statue made of ice, and I kept shivering through the night, but she was slowly getting warmer. I could hear her breathing picking up, and some color returned to her cheekbones.

I kept whispering to her "You'll be alright, I promise, please, just this one night."

I didn't remember when I had fallen asleep, again.

I woke up in my bed the next morning and felt happy for the first time in twelve days. Somehow, I had saved El's life, and that's all that mattered to me right now. Maybe it was a dream, but to me, it felt as real as the sun that rose in the morning. I jumped out of bed and ran into the washroom. The stranger was gone, and an old battle-hardened Paladin saluted me through the mirror. I quickly readied myself and ran downstairs and stopped dead in my tracks at the

scene in front of me.

A brand-new bicycle was waiting for me downstairs by the couch. It was the latest model that most kids in my neighborhood were dying to get their hands on. I looked around the room and saw my family busy with their daily chores. Dad was engrossed in the newspaper, mom was arranging breakfast, Nancy was chewing waffles, and Holly was giggling for some damn reason. A note was attached to the handle of the bike which read;

'Dear Michael, we're with you.'

That's it? Only five words?

My eyes watered as I realized how much pain I had put my family through the last twelve days. They didn't deserve any of it. I went to the table and stood in front of Dad.

"I'm sorry," that's all I could say.

Dad ran his hands through my hair and spoke in a slow and steady voice that I had not heard in years, "You give up too easily Michael. If you miss her so much, she will come back to you. Feelings are never one way."

They had heard a version of the story from the military in which the Russian spy was still alive and might pop into our home someday to take revenge. As expected, they had promised to call the military when that happened. But then Nancy sat with them and narrated another version of the story which brought my family to my side. Now they waited for the day when Eleven would come back to Wheeler residence so that they could shelter the girl who had sacrificed everything to save the life of their little boy.

I hugged Dad as Mom and Nancy joined us. All I needed was faith, and my family had more of it than I did. Only Nancy knew who Eleven was to me, but Mom and Dad felt it, and they all reached the same conclusion; *'Eleven would return to this house, even if it takes a lifetime.'*

I went to school cycling at the speed of the wind. About a hundred feet from the cycle stand I saw a few familiar shapes and clutched the brakes. I found Will standing near the stand along with Dustin and Lucas. Dustin looked hopeful as always, but Lucas was angry. His eyes breathed fire, and clearly, he didn't want to see me. But Will's eyes were kind and compassionate.

"Hey, Mike!" Will blurted out in a stiff and mechanical voice. He must have listened to a version of the story from Lucas and Dustin. I didn't mind at all. I had no problem being the villain for a change.

I walked to them and hugged Will, "You're back, I missed you bud."

Will hugged me back. I glanced at Lucas and Dustin, who instantly turned their eyes away. I wanted to tell them what happened last night, but they would be least bothered. So, I told my story to Will.

He listened to it, nudging me along the way when I stuttered. My face blushed when I started talking about the part where I spent the night wrapped around Eleven. Lucas rolled his eyes and Dustin looked at me like I was some kind of pervert. But I ignored them completely. I knew what was real and what was not and what happened last night was definitely not a dream. I left them and went to the class. Before stepping over the last stair, I looked back and saw a strange expression on their faces. All three of them looked worried. That was probably my mind playing games with me. I was sure that at least Lucas hated my guts.

I reached home early that evening after skipping Mr. Clarke's lecture and started working on my plan.

"Woah, survival gear, what's up?"

Nancy was standing near the doorway and staring at my shenanigans and from the looks of it, she had been standing there for some time now.

"Nothing, just mind your damn business."

I acted as if I was irritated but truth to be told I was scared shitless. If Nancy found out what I was planning, then she would lock me up in this room for the night. I knew my sister better than anyone else. She was a kind and compassionate soul, but when pushed to the limit she could be harder than Jim Hopper, and that was saying something.

Nancy got hurt, and it clearly showed in her eyes. But she smiled sadly and went away. It was about eleven PM when I quietly left the house. It was cold outside, and the wind pierced through my jacket and started freezing my skin, *'Too cold, SHIT.'* I hoped El would be okay until I found her. I got on my bicycle and raced through the night. Within an hour I made it to the edge of the woods but then my bike suddenly stopped moving as the tires gave away. I looked below and saw the thick wrapping of snow in the ground, and the tires could not grip properly. I left my bike and walked into the woods as

fast as I could.

It had started snowing again, and it was becoming difficult to see clearly. I took out a flashlight and made my way into the woods. After a few moments, I felt strange tiredness in my legs. Probably from all the cycling and I would take rest once I found Eleven, so I moved on. I walked for some time and then started calling for El in a loud voice. She didn't respond. She was probably suffering from the severe cold, 'SHIT.' I quickened my pace and walked forward as fast as I could. The forest had coyotes and other predators, but I wasn't scared at all. I had to save El at all costs.

I continuously walked for two hours but couldn't find the big Oak tree that I saw last night.

"Damn," I sighed and finally gave up. *'She would be alright for tonight,'* I prayed and turned around. Maybe tomorrow I would tell Hopper about it, *'That guy can arrange a search party faster than I can pull the Lazy boy's lever.'*

I started tracing my steps back, but two hours of snow had covered whatever tracks I had left behind, and at the heat of the moment I left my compass back in the house. The footsteps were gone, and I couldn't find my way back to the bicycle. I randomly walked for another hour, but I was utterly lost. Suddenly I felt exhausted as if the world was collapsing around me. The tiredness in my legs stopped me dead in my tracks. After a few moments the dizziness reduced and I figured out what was going on. Eleven days of stress, skipping meals and spending entire nights awake were finally taking their toll on my body. It had just thrown in the towel. I found a place near a tree trunk and sat there to take some rest. Then I immediately fell asleep.

I don't remember for how long I was out cold, but abruptly I came back to consciousness. My throat was nearly choked up, and I couldn't breathe properly. The swift tendrils of the freezing wind were reaching deep into my jacket and were slowly seeping the heat away from my body. I was still awake, but I was also dying a peaceful death. Suddenly I felt so alone, I had no one alongside me to witness my death. Mom... Dad... Nancy, their faces when they gave me the bicycle, flashed before me. I felt sorry for my parents, my sister, my friends, Mr. Clarke, and everyone that I had ever known.

But I was at peace, I was determined to meet Eleven, one way or another, either in this life or the next and today was the day we would finally meet at the gates of Heaven. I tried to smile at my fate one last time, but my face was already frozen over and did not respond to my command. Finally, I accepted that I had no one in this universe, so I closed my eyes and embraced my fate.

Before losing consciousness, I heard a sweet voice, *'Mike?'*

Suddenly I was woken up by someone or something dragging me by the collar. I tried to jerk my eyes open, but icicles had formed along my eyelids and kept it shut. My head was splitting apart in pain, and I didn't know where I was. But I was so weak that I couldn't even speak. The hands lifted me up and dragged me out of my icy coffin. Then they put me down on a snow mound nearby and released me. After a few seconds, I squinted my eyes and saw a tall figure looming over me, he seemed familiar.

"Hooray, he's alive!"

Dustin? Someone was rubbing my palms, Will?

"Guys! You came?" I squeaked a few words out of my mouth. My throat was parched, but I could slowly move my tongue to produce a few mumbling words.

"Yeah Yeah, don't get all girly on us. And no, we have no intention of lying down with you. I'd rather lose a limb, make it two limbs before I have to do that," Dustin was back to his old form.

I suddenly felt a pain in my chest, *'What have I done?'* These were my friends. The only ones I ever had, and the ones who had always stood by me through hell or high water and I threw them away at a blink of an eye. Life was giving me a second chance, and I would be a fool not to take it.

"I'm sorry Lucas, I was so mean to you that day, I didn't know what I was saying. I'm so sorry."

Lucas was apparently surprised, and he looked at me with... no, not hate, but compassion.

Then he spoke casually, "It's okay Mike, we understand. You're allowed to go batshit insane when something goes terribly wrong, and we all KNOW how you felt about Eleven. As per the party rules you are pardoned."

Then he smiled, and all of us started laughing. I was wrong, I wasn't

alone in this universe. I had my friend with them, *'NO, I had my army with me.'*

"Guys, I know you think I am crazy, but I felt her last night. No one would believe me so I..."

Dustin moved closer, "You should've told us what you were planning."

"You would never have believed me."

Dustin sighed, "You forgot who we are. Let's go."

"By the way..." Will made a comment, "...You're not as cold as you're supposed to be. You were out here for nearly four hours, but you're quite warm you know? Else you would have frostbites by now."

'The Cleric,' a voice fluttered in the wind.

I knew it long before he pointed it out. Still, I flashed a stupid smile and kept walking. We were making our way back without any problems because Lucas was a genius at finding paths.

'The Ranger,' a voice responded to the call.

Suddenly I asked, "How did you find me?"

Dustin said, "Well, we know that you are a dense idiot. So once I heard the story, I immediately knew that you would fuck up tonight. We went to your house at midnight, didn't find the cycle..."

'The Bard,' a voice exclaimed.

'Will you respond, Paladin?' The voice from my nightmares was overruled by another one.

"But how did you know where to look?" I knew the answer, but I wanted to validate my instincts.

"We don't know man, we saw the cycle and entered the woods. We didn't find you initially, but then we saw footsteps. We followed them and found you lying there on the ground, freezing to death."

I was lost in the woods for over four hours while it snowed like hell. Yet they saw my footsteps? I was also warm even after being covered by a thick layer of snow. All this together pointed towards an impossibility.

'But I had seen many impossibilities turning into possibilities two weeks back.,' I smiled and walked along.

Just as I was about to ride my cycle, I gave a loud scream, "SHIT!"

They all came running, "What's wrong?"

"My bag, did anyone bring back my bag?" They were all staring at me as if I had again gone batshit insane.

Then Will said, "No, we didn't see any bags nearby. What was in it anyway?"

"Wait, let me remember."

'There was a jacket, a blanket, a lighter and some flint, a knife, some chocolate bars, a few boxes of Eggos, a pair of shoes, socks, a trouser, and a few other surviving tools,' I recalled the supplies and smiled. But then I shrugged my shoulders casually, "Just some food and my compass."

"Damn dude, you lost a lot of stuff," they started laughing, and I joined them. I was feeling genuinely happy.

I was sure that we would not find the bag there tomorrow, or the day after. But it had reached its intended destination. It would save a life today and maybe tomorrow as well, and that's all I needed at the time.

Suddenly Lucas came near to me, "Mike?"

"Yeah, Lucas?"

The Ranger placed a hand on my hand, "We WILL keep on searching."

The Bard placed his hand on the other two, "We WILL never give up."

The Cleric gently clutched the three hands, "We WILL find her."

The Paladin gritted his teeth, "Whatever it takes."

'You can run away from me Eleven. You can run away from all of us, but we won't stop chasing you. Because you had stolen something from me, and I want it back,' I looked back towards the forest and smiled to the unknown. It was probably my imagination, but for a fraction of a second, it appeared as if the wind stopped and the snowflakes froze in time for a second, but before I could get a better look, the wind howled through the forest and covered it in a white mist.

I didn't find Eleven that night, but I found my friends, again. And I had an assuring feeling inside. With Lucas, Dustin and Will with me, I will rescue Eleven and conquer the world along the way.

3. The Eulogy

Chapter 3-The Eulogy

Day Hundred and Twenty One:

Mr. Clarke was a stubborn man. He had been trying set up a strange looking contraption on his desk for the last twenty minutes but couldn't get it working, but he was far from giving up. For today's exercise, the desk had been moved to the middle of the classroom, and the chairs were arranged circularly around it. Lucas strapped a piece of tape to the last sheet of black colored papers that were being used to cover the windows. The only sources of light remaining in the classroom were the bright fluorescent tubes that bathed us in cold, white light.

"Dustin?" Mr. Clarke called out in frustration.

"Yes, my Lord?" Dustin was the epitome of earnest chivalry and knighthood. I swallowed a small laugh.

"Help me plug this thing in," Mr. Clarke sighed.

Dustin went running as Lucas came and sat beside Will and Me. We had no idea what Mr. Clarke's device will end up doing, but we were really excited. Finally, the device was correctly set up, and Dustin came and sat beside us.

"Finally," Mr. Clarke got up to switch the light off, and Dustin immediately groaned as a slap landed on his head.

"Now boys, who wants to see some magic?"

There was a click and immediately the room was bathed with a pure white light coming from the black device. It didn't look like anything we had ever seen before. Thousands of pinpricks of light emerged from the device and bathed the room with stars and constellation.

"Now kids, this is what the sky looks like!"

Mr. Clarke exclaimed, "That's the Solar System. It's really just a point of light, but in this vast cosmos, that's how big we really are."

We leaned forward to get a better look. It was fascinating.

"That's Alpha Centauri, the closest star system to our Solar System.

It's about 4.37 light years from earth. Now we know how fast light travels, don't we? Mike?"

I blurted out the answer.

"That's correct," Mr. Clarke continued. I was only listening half-heartedly because for some reason I was feeling a strange pressure on my heart. I had no idea what was happening to me, but I was sure that this was not about Eleven. Though I still remembered those days like as if they were yesterday but thinking about Eleven did not cause so much pain anymore.

Throughout the first three months, we continuously searched for Eleven in the woods. We went there almost every day. Me, Lucas, Dustin, and Will, the four clueless boys. We went over every nook and cranny, got chased by Coyotes, fell down a stream and almost got swept away, and Lucas broke his arm, but we couldn't find her. We never discovered the bag I left behind on that fateful night either. All we could find is an empty box of Eggos, apparently eaten by Coyotes as the box was ripped open from all sides. I kept believing that Eleven probably ate the Eggos, then the Coyotes found the box. At the end of the weeks that followed, we had to stop searching. We thought that wherever she was, she was safe and was taking care of herself. I went back there from time to time and left some Food for her, those no longer disappeared.

Sometimes we encountered a ferocious wild animal in the woods. The beast would prowl the forest looking for prey, and after finding them, it would proceed to give them a lecture about the dangers lurking in the woods. The beast was the Police chief, Hopper who often discovered us when we somehow managed to screw up and rescued us in the nick of time. The crazy bastard said that he was looking for the Mayor's cat.

Back in the classroom suddenly I was brought out of my trance by a whisper, 'Mike...'

'*THE FUCK?*' I fell from my chair.

"And kids, Alpha Centauri is part of the Centaurus Constellation. It has a total of Eleven..." Mr. Clarke stopped his speech midway and walked briskly towards me.

"I, I... am okay, sorry for that, Mr. Clarke."

Mr. Clarke looked at me with concern in his eyes and nodded slowly.

He went back to his pedestal as I mechanically climbed back into the chair. Lucas grabbed my arm, but I assured him with a nod. Then I closed my eyes to find Eleven, '*SHIT.*' I could have sworn that I felt a presence nearby. Someone was watching over me, someone was trying to speak to me, someone who did not know so many words, but still tried as hard as possible. Someone a lot like Eleven. I jerked my eyes open. It was not Eleven, it was one of the tricks my mind used to play on me when I lost her. '*No more,*' I focused on the Stars above.

"...Eleven stars, they burn brightly in the night sky. You can easily find them..." Mr. Clarke continued.

I came home early that day and went down to the basement. The tent was still up, but I didn't keep the Falcon or the T-Rex in there anymore, no Eggos either. But I had a daily routine to perform. After going inside, I sat down, grabbed the Supercom, turned to channel eleven and started reciting my day to Eleven. I didn't leave anything out because I was not ashamed to tell her anything. Then I got up and sneaked through the back door.

After ensuring no was looking at me, I took my cycle and rode towards Lock Nora. It was a chilly night. Slight breezes sent ripples in the canopy overhead as I raced towards the meeting spot. The journalist was waiting for me there. He was a strange man for sure. He had a long black beard and always wore tinted glasses and a hat even if it was not snowing or raining. He said his name was Murray Bauman.

"Ah... Master Mike, you're very punctual!" He tipped his hat to me as I bowed my head and walked towards him after leaving my cycle.

I had no intention of becoming his friend. I just wanted some information that he could get for me. He knew about a lot of things, and he had a lot of resources. I made a deal with him a few weeks back. I'll help him look for Barbara, and in return, he'll help me find Eleven, who he referred to as the Russian spy. That was better in my opinion. We sat down on a shady bench at the corner of the street. Murray handed me a can of soda and brought out a can of beer and took a sip. "So, does this look right to you?"

He handed me a large photograph. It showed a strange looking board which was illuminated by red lights. The board was full of photos

and had red lines made of strings connecting them. I was shocked to see how much he got right, the characters, the events, the dates, nearly everything. Except for two critical elements. First, Eleven was still a Russian girl to him. A deadly Russian spy with super-cool abilities, but all within normal human boundaries. Second, he got the timeline wrong, most of it anyway. 'He is dangerous.' I grimaced at the thought. He managed to get the truth, though only half of it, and I was not going to correct his mistakes. I did not want Eleven's face plastered across America, *'Super-girl is real, and she's American.'* The fewer people knew, the better. I nodded and gave him small instructions to fix his diagram.

"Now, did you find anything?" I asked impatiently.

Murray sighed, "I had that ash analyzed in a lab on the East Coast."

I perked up, the proof was finally coming.

"I'm sorry Mike, that ash was too deteriorated to make a full identification, but..."

I swallowed bile in my throat.

"They found carbon, that's basically ash. So something organic burnt in the fire. Now it could also be the wood but..." Murray stopped. I wanted to kick him in his nuts.

"...they also found traces of human skin."

I wanted to rewind the tape that was playing those words. I was too shocked to speak.

"Now you need to tell me how you got this ash. It might be a homicide. Where in the forest did you find it?"

The words hit like a jackhammer to my abdomen, I gasped for breath and bent over. Then everything came rushing in as the dam shattered forever. A torrent of memories flooded my soul and started choking me up. I was too weak to speak anymore. So, I got up and left without a word. Mr. Murray didn't try to stop me, but he had a look of concern in his face.

I kept paddling aimlessly as I didn't have any destination. I hated even the fucking bicycle for no damn reason. This was not the bicycle on which I carried Eleven to the school and also helped her escape the *'Bad men.'* But I hated it nonetheless.

'The magic is over. Welcome back Mike Wheeler, I missed you,' The voice from the classroom was back, and he sounded excited.

I wanted to burn the bike down, alongside that fucking lab. And with it, all those people who worked there. I kept paddling as fast as I could to run away from the pain. Then when I couldn't paddle anymore, I stopped.

I found myself standing at the edge of the Quarry. The same place where they found Will's fake body, the same place where Eleven saved my life, the same place where I learned the most valuable lesson in life, *'Friends will do anything for each other, even sacrifice their life.'* A lifetime ago I had jumped in the Quarry on instinct, not knowing what would happen. But somewhere back in my mind, I knew that El would save me. I took a deep breath and went to the edge of the Quarry and sat down, looking at the dark water below. Thoughts came crashing into my mind.

Eleven, who was she to me?

Moments flashed by through a video camera that was playing in my mind. The picture was so bright that it felt as if I was living them at that very moment. I remembered the fierce looking girl in the yellow shirt whom we found in the woods while looking for Will and I clearly recalled how all her fierceness went away in an instant when she laid her eyes on me for the first time. I could only see relief and happiness on that beautiful face. Some would say that Eleven looked like a boy, but I never gave a damn. I neither loved her like how Steve loved Nancy nor loved her how Dad loved Mom. She was a part of my soul and her gender or looks never mattered to me.

"SHE WAS MY FRIEND," I screamed at the unknown, and it echoed back its support.

I reminisced the days when she was hiding in my basement, living on Eggos and leftovers. She was magical in every sense of the word. It was not the powers that enchanted me, it was her innocence. Before meeting Eleven, I didn't care about girls at all. They were loud, short-tempered and threw tantrums all the time. But something changed inside me when I met her for the first time. I am not ashamed to admit that I fell for her. I fell in love with her because she transformed my life, with nothing but unspoken words and unacted gestures.

Let me explain. She liked me, but not like how Nancy ogled over

Steve day in and day out. After the first date, Nancy wouldn't stop talking about Steve at all. El didn't say much. In fact, she never said that she liked me. I would like to think that she didn't know the words. But the truth is that she didn't need to. Dad used to say, "Your behavior is your identity."

And her behavior revealed her soul to me, unlike anyone I had ever known. Eleven was weird, she was a freak, and she could do things no other human on this planet was capable of doing. She could move things with her mind, even as large as a van. Distance didn't phase her, she could find people from across the dimensions just by looking at their pictures. She could carry their voices through the radio. She could do a lot of things, but those were not the ones that freaked me out. What really got me was how loyal she was to me, to Mike Wheeler, the nerd and the complete loser from Hawkins Middle School.

I was still amazed by what little it took to make her happy. I remembered telling her that she was pretty and she was shocked beyond belief. She looked most content that day which left me baffled. It was a simple compliment, but apparently, it was the best anyone had ever given to her. She kept repeating that word, "Pretty," as if she was trying to convince herself that she heard it correctly. She was shellshocked that there was anyone in this world who thought that she was pretty.

'You were El. You were the prettiest girl in the world,' I mumbled because I didn't have the energy left to shout anymore.

Lucas and Dustin smirked as they thought that I was joking, well I wasn't. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my life, and the list included Clara from school, who won the beauty pageant three times in a row.

Tears came crashing down my cheeks and disappeared into the dark void below my feet. I wondered how many people had arrived here to cry their hearts out to give rise to such a massive pool, probably millions. El kept returning to my mind. She was amazed by the little things that we took for granted. The Lazy Boy was one of the crappiest things I had ever seen in my life, only Dad liked it. But she was ecstatic when I made her sit on it and pulled the lever. I remember her smiling for the first time that day, a smile so pure I had never seen that from anyone except Holly. How little it took to

surprise her. She was like a child. Everything in this world was new to her, even something as pathetic as frozen waffles.

And so was Mike Wheeler. I never got to know what made her so attached to me, or what made me grow so fond of her. Did I love her because she was beautiful? I don't know. I never thought about her like that. But she was pretty, and I wanted the world to recognize it. I was determined to see the day when the world would look at Eleven and ogle at her beauty. But I needed a venue, 'SNOWBALL!'

She could come to the Snowball with me, but I needed to dupe her because no sane girl would go to the Snowball with Mike 'Loser' Wheeler. But Eleven was oblivious of that fact.

So, when I casually threw the suggestion about her going to the Snowball with me, I was fully expecting her to say yes because I was sure she didn't know the implications. I felt a tinge of guilt because I was taking advantage of her. She never went to school, and her choice of boys was limited to Mike Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, and Lucas Sinclair. It was a natural choice. But then when I looked into her eyes, my heart stopped. She was looking at me with those big, soulful eyes. And in a moment I realized that she knew. I had no clue how, but she knew what going to the snowball meant, and I was scared shitless. What if she said no? What was I going to do? I felt the moment slipping.

Mike Wheeler was used to getting rejected by girls, most of the girls in school wouldn't even consider becoming friends with me, let alone going to the snowball. It shouldn't have scared me, but it did. It scared me so much. I couldn't lose her. I thought about at all my strategies, babbled a few nonsensical sentences and then I straight out thrust my lips toward her. I wanted to kiss her just like how it showed in the movies. Girls usually said Yes after that. I was going to kiss her... well, not like how I caught Nancy and Steve one day. But I just wanted to quickly touch my lips with hers. Mike Wheeler was not going to suck face... *she met me part way*. She leaned in at the exact moment when I did. My heart stopped as her lips touched mine. It was the answer, it said 'Yes.'

'Yes,' not like *I would love to go to the snowball with you Mike Wheeler,* but 'Yes,' like *I'd love to spend the rest of my life with you, Mike Wheeler, wherever it takes us.'*

I put up my shaking palms to my face. These were the palms that were wrapped around her hands when I made that promise to Eleven in that classroom, *'I promise that I would take you to the snowball.'*
'I promise that we'll always be together, whatever it takes.'

A promise that was finally broken after all these months. Eleven was gone, like warm breath on a pane of cold glass that yielded to the elements after a finite amount of time. She came into my life for a few days, but it felt like an eternity. Now she was gone, and I accepted its finality. She was not dead, I could never admit that. Eleven had gone to someplace better than here, and she would never come back. I wished that she would find someone there who would feed her Eggos, call her Pretty and kiss her with all the emotions I had evolved for her.

"Sorry, Eleven," I got up and apologized to her. It was time to go. My life needed to move on, whatever was left of it. I was sure that I would never find someone like Eleven ever again, and I was not talking about her powers. Then something went through my mind like a signal from deep space. Purely by instinct, I took a step towards the edge of the cliff. A faint Echo shot out from the aether, *'Mike! DONT!'*

I smiled and yelled at the unknown, "You were always there for us when we ran into trouble, weren't you, El? Do you feel my pain now? Shouldn't you be here to save me now?"

Silence greeted me in response. I looked at the water below, it was quite far away. Last time when I made the jump Eleven caught me. She couldn't save me this time. But I kept looking at the water, what if?

'NO,' the rational part of my mind screamed. *'You dolt. You cannot jump. She's gone, and you have nothing to gain by jumping. You are not going to save anyone, think about your friends and family.'*

Faces flashed in reverse order on the screen that was playing back my memories inside my head. Dustin, Lucas, Will, and the twelfth night when they rescued me from certain death. I remembered the D&D games, I recalled them standing by me when Troy came for me, I witnessed Dustin's face as he begged me not to jump while having a knife on his neck. I remembered Lucas, panting, as he drew the target on the demo-gorgon that night to save us. I remembered Mom, Dad, I

remembered Nancy. The countless nights that I cried with my head buried in her chest, how she comforted me while crying herself. They had given me so much hope and so much love, I couldn't throw it all away.

I made up my mind. Eleven wouldn't be here to save me tonight, or ever. But I'll remember Eleven, forever. Maybe someday I'll discover time travel and go back in time to rescue her. But until that day comes, its goodbye.

"Goodbye Eleven. If you can hear me, please know that I loved you and always will. And I promise that I will never forget you." I finally said it out loud. It felt like a heavy rock crushing my soul, but it felt good. I finally delivered her Eulogy. If she were out there looking at me now, she would be happy. I wiped my eyes and stood up.

A sweet voice broke through some unknown shield and echoed inside my heart, *'I will always love you, Mike Wheeler. Wait for me!'*

I lost my footing and headed straight towards the lake.

4. Brightest Day

Chapter 4 – Brightest Day

Day One Hundred and Twenty Two:

"Aaaaa..." I screamed at the top of my lungs while falling straight towards the bottomless pit of the quarry. Will would have probably shrieked like me if he had actually fallen here four months ago. The police found the body a week later, pale and cold to the touch. A few days later it turned out to be a fake, but this time it won't be. My hands found a life of their own as they frantically tried to find a hold as the ground disappeared beneath my feet. Self-preservation was a fantastic survival mechanism, even at the moment of inescapable death it kept trying to save me at all costs. But this time it had kicked in a little too late, and Eleven wasn't there to protect me.

Checkmate.

Suddenly I stopped mid-air as something grabbed my shirt and arrested my fall. I thought about Eleven, did she come back? There was no other possibility.

'You came back!' Before I could cry in joy, I was yanked upwards by a sudden force and thrown into the ground a few feet behind the edge. I hit hard and lost my bearings for a few seconds. Eleven must have been royally pissed off because she had never thrown me this hard before. Well, it was nothing a few Eggos and kisses couldn't cure. Then I looked up smiling and witnessed the most horrifying sight any human child had ever seen. I prayed to God that no innocent child had to ever witness something as horrendous as this in their entire lifetime.

Hopper, wearing a Hawaiian shirt and some strange colored shorts, was glowering at me as if he wanted to kill me himself. His face was a mask of part fury, part horror, and part frustration. I took the time to analyze the situation.

First, I was saved, *'Thank God.'*

Second, it was Hopper who saved me, *'Dear God.'*

Third, how the fuck did he find me? *'Shit.'*

Fourth, Hopper was a crazy bastard, 'FUCK!'

Hopper spat out a series of words, "WHAT... THE... HELL... ARE... YOU... DOING... HERE... KID?"

"I..." I was lost for words.

"WELL?" Hopper was almost foaming at his mouth.

"I slipped," the truth was the best I could conjure up at the moment, so I decided to run with it.

"Okay, let's try this one more time," Hopper was still pissed off, but he had calmed down a bit.

"Why did you come here?"

I decided to expand the truth, "I came to say goodbye to Eleven, then I slipped."

"Uh huh. So you didn't jump?" Hopper was more curious than furious now.

"No, swear to God. I just slipped."

"Okay, I believe you. Let's go."

We got in the car, and Hopper started driving as if nothing happened. But, he appeared relieved. I couldn't believe that it had been so easy to convince him. I imagined that the only way to make Hopper believe my story would be to play the recording of what I was thinking before I slipped. But he didn't care that much. He was pressing the radio button at specific gaps, but I was too shocked to remember the pattern.

'What gives? Who is he sending messages to? And through Morse? Who the fuck uses Morse nowadays?'

And then it clicked, *'Murray, that rat bastard.'*

I had seen him in the chief's office more than once in the past few months. He must have called it in after I had left. He did notice my expression as I was moving, and he was worried about the possible homicide. Moreover, he was just the kind of spook to use Morse code. Though I was not sure why he cared, or why the chief was entertaining him.

People in town said that Hopper had finally lost it. He had stopped drinking, he was seen buying healthy food, and he was no longer found in the pub. Some said that he was even trying to quit smoking. But people would rather believe that a fish had learned to live on the land than to think that Hopper was trying to fix his habits. So, he was

certified crazy by the town. I didn't need logic like those, I already knew that he was fucking crazy. The way he kept searching for the mayor's cat in the woods revealed his madness long before people started noticing.

'Crazy bastard, probably ate the Mayor's cat,' I thought and suppressed my frustration.

The car cruised towards the town in an unhurried pace while I kept on thinking about the last hour. I had just said goodbye to Eleven. It lifted a heavy burden off my soul but left another one in its place. I had finally delivered Eleven's eulogy but at the same time had to accept the fact that she was gone forever. And to top it off, my mind had played a horrible trick on me at the last moment when it mimicked Eleven's voice and said she loved me. I really hated my mind now, I was probably halfway crazy. Hopper suddenly glanced at me and sighed, "Here."

He handed me a handkerchief. Apparently, he had noticed the streams of water that were flowing from my eyes and wetting my T-shirt. A few seconds later Hopper stopped the car beside the road and turned towards me. Then he spoke gently, "We need to talk."

I looked into his eyes as he quickly glanced at the radio. He was still acting funnily.

"Yeah, okay?"

Hopper said, "Tell me what happened. The last I checked, the four of you were busy searching for Eleven in the middle of the damned Woods. It was all going okay, but now I find you falling in the quarry in the middle of the night. Help me understand."

I decided that the night could not get any worse. So, I told him almost everything except the part about Murray. Instead, I made up some stupid story involving Lucas's distant uncle who was a forensic scientist. To get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding Eleven's disappearance, I had sent him the ash and got a negative reply. Then it all went downhill for me. Hopper looked like he didn't believe a single word of that story but chose not to prod further.

But he went in a different direction altogether. He sighed and asked, "Listen, kid. Why did you give up?"

'Huh?' I swallowed. "El is d..."

Hopper interjected, "What proof do you have? That ash? That is

completely inconclusive."

"But the scientist..."

"Don't lecture me, I have been doing this for a very long time."

"So, what do you want me to do? Keep on searching for her? EVEN THOUGH SHE DOESN'T WANT TO COME BACK?" I screamed my frustration at him.

"Who says she doesn't?" Hopper glared at me.

'What the actual fuck?' I was suddenly alarmed. Was I arguing with Hopper, the police chief dressed in Hawaiian clothes, in his van, in the middle of nowhere? About whether Eleven, a psychic girl, who was the reason for Hopper's headache for ten days, wanted to come back to me or not?

"Listen," Hopper placed his thumb and index on the bridge of his nose and inhaled. Then he spoke in a rumbling voice, "The night the fed went to your place, they bugged all the rooms."

What in the world? I felt pissed off because I had lost all my private moments with Eleven. Someone was listening in on our conversations, though it was one way. I blushed, but then Hopper smiled an all-knowing smile, "Don't sweat it, kid. I took the bugs out a week later."

He did? That was amazing. Hopper was terrific, but he was still a prick.

Hopper appear stressed as he kept speaking, "But they are still watching you, only you. They are not interested in anyone else. Not me, not Joyce, not those other kids, not even Nancy or Jonathan. But you. From the moment you go to school until you come back. They have cars following you, they have agents in the school."

My ears perked up. But he assured me with a nod and continued, "No, they don't mean any harm to you or your friends or family, but they are still watching you. Why do you think they are spending so much effort doing it?"

Hopper wasn't lying, I had seen the tell-tale signs earlier, but I thought they were watching everyone. I didn't need time to think, I spoke just as he closed his mouth, "Maybe because they know that she was my friend?"

Hopper smirked a sly smile when he heard the last part as if he somehow knew who Eleven really was to me. But thankfully, he took a moment to compose himself and continued, "So what? According to you and your brilliant deductive capabilities, she's DEAD."

Did Hopper wince at the last word? He continued, "Why would they still be interested in you? They cared about the Gate and the Monster too, do you see them following Will everywhere?"

Suddenly it clicked, and it was impossible, so I started listing the items down one by one.

First, the feds were watching me, no one else, for the last four months.

Second, the only thing that separated me from others was Eleven, and the feds learned that information from my parents on that fateful night.

Third, the feds were driven by Hawkins lab. They were the ones who trained Eleven, and they had always wanted her back.

Fourth, they probably had far sophisticated scientists who were trying to make sense of what happened that night than some random guy working for a spook like Murray.

Fifth, they haven't stopped looking for her, not yet.

Multiple impossibilities pointed toward one greater impossibility. But as I wrote earlier, *'I had seen many impossibilities turning into possibilities in those ten days.'*

It suddenly felt as if I could not stay awake any longer. But somehow, I managed to squeak out a few words, "Thank you. Thank you, Hopper."

Hopper patted me in the back and then stepped on the gas.

"I was like you after I lost my daughter, Sarah," Hopper spoke with a strain in his voice.

I was suddenly interested. There were rumors in town, but Hopper avoided them like the plague. Now he was confessing to me? To Mike Wheeler? He must have been hit in the head too many times while he was in the Upside Down.

"I wanted to give up. I wanted to kill myself, I was not going to SLIP kid," He stressed on the word.

"I was planning to JUMP OFF and end it there."

"Then?" I wanted to know the answer.

"Then I didn't, I decided to keep on going."

"And did you find her?" I bit my tongue, Dad always complained that I had a quick tongue. I wished that I could take back those words.

But Hopper sighed, "No, I didn't. But I redeemed myself. I didn't find

Sarah, but I found Will and got him back. That was a compromise I am ready to live with."

His words were calm and determined. An awkward silence descended in the van as I realized that Hopper was right, and I was a fool.

"You really like Eleven, don't you?" Hopper suddenly asked.

I just nodded my head instinctively, "She made me feel warm and fluffy."

Hopper smiled, "Don't ever forget this feeling kid, always look to the future, and keep on believing. A man who stops believing is a man who never gets what he desires."

He continued in a low growling voice, "And you are a man now, Mike Wheeler. You are no longer a kid, and you need to have more confidence in your beliefs."

Hopper had a particular enthusiasm in his voice, "Now tell me, do you believe that she's alive?"

It wasn't a question. "Yes."

"Now do you believe, that she wants to come back to you?"

It felt like a test, "Yes."

"Do you believe that she's worth waiting for?"

It was a test after all. Though I had no idea for what. It was as if I was going to marry his daughter, "Yes."

"But will you still go out actively looking for her, knowing how much danger you put both yourselves in doing that every time?"

It was a full-blown police inquiry now, "No, I'll stop for now. But I won't stop looking for Eleven, Hopper. If not today, then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then the next week. The feds can't lock me up forever."

"I WILL FIND HER," the determination in my voice shocked me.

"She'll find you long before that," Hopper had the confidence of a bookie who had already rigged the game. It was a kind and warm gesture and to be honest, it sounded like a finality. For some unknown reason, Hopper had more confidence in Eleven finding me first rather than me finding her. It was odd, but who cared, it was a win-win for me anyways. I smiled at him. Hopper stopped the van in front of Elma's coffee shop, "Let's get some hot chocolate."

We went inside and found Murray impatiently tapping his foot on the stool. He started speaking as soon as we entered, "Hey chief, it's the Wheeler kid, I think he might be trying to do something...!"

He stopped as he found me behind Hopper's large frame, "Oh, never mind..."

But I had already heard what I needed to hear, *'What the hell?' Didn't he rat me out to the chief? Were THEY playing games with me? How did Hopper find me?'*

I was furious, but Hopper moved ahead with a slow and steady gait. He went to Murray and started whispering in his ears, I didn't hear a single word, but I felt the menacing aura Hopper was projecting as he laid down those words. Murray's face went pale as he swallowed and nodded a few times and then quickly left the room. Hopper came back to me and escorted me to the nearest table and ordered two cups of Hot chocolate and some waffles. The words had run out suddenly, so we waited and kept awkwardly glancing at each other.

Hopper looked like he was about to make the most difficult decision in his life. He pondered it in his head for some time then sighed and put a hand in his pocket. I became tense because I knew that Hopper was crazy and he might shoot me next. But he brought out a small envelope made of plastic, opened it and carefully dragged out a small piece of pink colored fabric. It was worn, and the color had nearly washed out. It looked like something from a prom dress. He laid it down under the light.

"Oh, that looks like Nancy's dress, OHH!" I jumped up, but Hopper pushed me down.

"They found this inside a corridor at the opposite end of the school, two hours after you were vacated. Looks familiar?"

I was barely able to contain my excitement, I knew that dress, I knew it as if it was a part of my own skin. It was the last dress El wore before she was kill... NO, dragged into the upside down by the Demogorgon. Hopper looked at me with cold eyes and spoke with a voice of steel, "Not a word of this gets out. If it does, it'll put both you and HER in danger," Hopper emphasized the word *'Her.'* But he didn't need to tell me. I wouldn't do anything to put Eleven in danger, but she was alive.

"WHERE IS SHE?" I almost screamed at him.

Hopper grimaced and replied, "I'm still trying to find her. She's not in Hawkins that's for sure. It'll take time. The trail's gone cold."

"I..."

Hopper leaned forward, "SHE WILL COME BACK TO YOU. You have to be patient. Keep that fire burning inside you."

I was almost on the verge of crying. I sobbed out a few lines, "You sure she'll come back to me?"

Hopper demolished my despair with a swift blow, "Hundred Percent." "How do you know?"

"Because I'm sure that she feels the same way about you."

This was the proof that I really needed, not the ashes, not some shady spook like Murray, not some scientists at Hawkins Labs. But the fact that Hopper, a forever skeptic, one who was there that night, also believed that Eleven was alive. I breathed a sigh of relief and broke down on the table. I felt so happy, my dreams were not over. They could still come true. NO, they WILL come true.

About thirty minutes later, Hopper dropped me at my home along with my bike. I still tightly clutched the piece of fabric in my hands, I was sure that Hopper would want it back, but I was not ready to part with the only evidence of Eleven's survival. But he just turned around and walked to the van, climbed on board and started the engine. I was still looking at him with apprehension. But then he spoke, "Hold on to her memory, kid. Wherever she is, she would want you to remember her. And when the time is right, she'll come back to you."

Then he drove away without a word.

I would find her. NO, we would find each other, someday, somewhere, and both of us will instantly recognize our soulmate, like that rainy night and then we will be together forever. This was a promise made by two individuals who complemented each other in every possible way. I wrapped my fingers around Eleven's memory and swore to the heavens, *'I will not fight anymore. I will wait for you, right here, forever.'*

AN: *I have started my own IG handle: inktopia dot resurrect. You can check out my account for fic updates, fic trailers, tiny tales, quotes, poetry, concepts, timelines, reviews and recommendations of ST fics from other authors, and finally, Video Edits. You can also reach out to me via DM, channels are always open.*

The trailer for this fic is uploaded to my IG now.